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The Bieber trap

Paedophiles don't need to hide behind bushes.
They just create a 'Justin Bieber' profile and
wait.

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STORY: TRENT DALTON

Gordon Chalmers had a way of connecting with students. What made his law lectures so compelling was the deep humanity - conveyed in his message; his sincerity, his earnestness, how truly evolved and well-rounded his thought processes were. He says he's from the Yanyuwa people of the Northern Territory. From the Gulf Country. He lectured on law and indigenous rights and philosophy at the Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland with such a true sense of place and spirit that he lifted students to places in their thinking they had never been. Because he cared. Because he connected.

Gordon Chalmers allegedly had a way of connecting with kids online, too. He is accused of creating accounts on Facebook and Skype under the guise of Canadian pop superstar Justin Bieber. Through an alleged decade-long spiral down a dark-web wormhole of online child exploitation, police will say Chalmers sat before the cold light of a computer screen in suburban Brisbane pretending to be the soulful teen dream who made a billion girls swoon with the immortal words: *Baby, baby, baby, oooooohhhh*.

Chalmers is accused of building personal relationships online with at least 157 children across Australia, the US, the UK and the world. He's a polite, bookish, 42-year-old husband and father of two, but he allegedly messaged like the brash 23-year-old megastar, imparting Bieber's playful, smart-mouth side and his softer side, too; the "is it too late now to say sorry" side. He could listen. He could be a friend. And all he allegedly asked for in return was a child's innocence: a naked selfie; a brief pornographic act. Police will say he convinced 157 kids to do things to themselves they never thought themselves capable of; that he lifted kids to places in their thinking they had never been. Because he cared. Because he connected.

*Be honest, girl, how many tears you let hit the floor?
How many bags you packed just to take them back?*

... But no more. If you let me inside of your world there'll be one less lonely girl.

One Less Lonely Girl, Justin Bieber, 2009



Gordon Chalmers

Detective Inspector Jon Rouse sighs in his chair, flattened emotionally by three words. On a cool autumn day outside the Basil Sellers Theatre, a stone's throw from the pristine lake at the heart of the Gold Coast's Bond University, the man who has spent the past decade of his life turning Queensland Police's Task Force Argos unit into a world leader in the investigation of online crimes against children reluctantly voices these three words with a visible

shudder. "The Bieber case," he says. "That's the one that makes me despair."

Rouse didn't despair in 2008, when he witnessed live-streamed child sexual abuse for the first time. "We had a mother in the Philippines engaging with one of my undercover," he says. "She was offering her children up for sexual abuse. 'What would you like me to do to my children? OK, give me 50 US dollars.'"

Rouse didn't despair during the globally orchestrated 2015 arrest of Peter Scully, a former Melbourne businessman in the Philippines charged with crimes including the rape and torture of a five-year-old girl; the abuse of children he filmed digging their own graves. "You'll never see a greater animal than Peter Scully," Rouse says. "That's as bad as it gets."

He didn't despair because he can fight a man like Scully. With a growing team of international collaborators of the highest order, he can put men like Scully away for life. But he can't fight the dreamboat charisma of Justin Bieber. He can't fight the online magnetism of a pop music icon just as he can't fight the lightning-quick real-time impulses of 157 children who might dream of being Justin Bieber's friend.

"One hundred and fifty-seven alleged victims globally," Rouse says, shaking his head. "We have a generation of kids at the moment, and we think that we're educating them, and we think that we're warning them about the dangers of online solicitation." He shakes his head again. "We are missing the mark, big time. Clearly. How does a man go online pretending to be Justin Bieber and he convinces 157 children around the world that he really is Justin Bieber and he gets them to do things on video that ..." He pauses. "That ... are just horrendous."

He leans in across the table. "Maybe don't print this, but ..." And he explains the allegations against Gordon Chalmers as delicately as he can, the depths to which he allegedly encouraged girls to sink, things about objects and kids alone in their bedrooms, things he encouraged kids to do to other kids. He tells you these things and your ill-prepared brain is too responsive for its own good; it makes mental images that you don't want it to make. But these are the images Rouse and his team see in live-stream or photographic colour every day. It's their job to remember these images. Victim identification. Members of his 30-person team are equally cursed and blessed with the ability to recall the smallest details of photographs seen years earlier; needles in haystacks like the shape of a bedroom power socket, an earring on a cropped-out face, posters on walls, a pencil case on a desk, a badge, a school uniform logo, a missing tooth, a tattoo, a scar, a birthmark, an innocuous small hole in a kid's T-shirt.

"...and [Chalmers] is capturing it on video," Rouse claims. "And then he uses that to 'sextort' them. He plays it back to them. You know, 'If you

don't do this, I'm going to put this on YouTube and the whole world's going to see'. And then we see these kids ..."

He shakes his head again, struggling to contain his frustration. "You know, that can then lead to things like youth suicide; this is an enormous global issue and my concern is we think we're sending the messages out to adults about the dangers. Well, these kids are not listening. We're doing something wrong in our messaging that these kids, in enormous proportions, are just doing it. What's going on is these children are self-producing material. It's flooding the internet. It's coming into our cases. And it never needed to happen. They shouldn't be doing this."

A man in a cowboy hat and suit passes Rouse's table, nods hello. That man is a Texas Ranger named Cody Mitchell. He walks in to the Basil Sellers Theatre and joins a group of fellow law enforcement officers from around the world: members of the LAPD, Interpol, Europol, the US Marshals Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, US Homeland Security Investigations and Australian Border Force. They're here for Task Force Argos's fifth annual Youth, Technology and Virtual Communities conference, a highly sensitive event, unique in the Asia-Pacific, that assembles 450 of the sharpest minds in global child exploitation policing.

Rouse has to be careful what specifics he offers about the Bieber case because it's before the courts but, he says, networking like this was instrumental. "Next year's conference will have a lot to do with this case," he says, adding that it shows the vulnerability of children using social media as much as it shows "the global reach and skill that child sex offenders have to groom and seduce victims".

Argos and the Australian Federal Police were tipped off through watertight connections with US Homeland Security and German Federal Police. In November last year, police raided Chalmers' home in Kenmore, southwest Brisbane. He was initially charged with possession of child -

exploitation material and using a carriage service to groom and procure children under 16, and remanded in custody. An initial search of his computer hardware allegedly found he had acquired some 6000 Skype contacts, mostly with children overseas. In March, after thorough investigation of his voluminous computer files by Task Force Argos, Chalmers was charged with 931 offences, including indecent treatment of children and the making of child exploitation material. The case will next be mentioned in court on July 3, and the courts will determine whether he is guilty or innocent.

'You'll never see a greater animal than Peter Scully (pictured),' says Detective Inspector Jon Rouse.

“We bring horses to the water, knowing they will drink it,” says Rouse’s friend and frequent collaborator Tim Van Eester, a chief inspector from Belgium, to explain how offenders are caught in global police stings. Van Eester has led more than 1000 child sexual exploitation investigations across Europe that have spilled into jurisdictions across the world, including several in Australia. He worked with Argos on the 2015 investigation into the crimes of Melbourne nanotechnology student Matthew Graham, who led a double life online under the pseudonym Lux, running a series of “hurtcore” child abuse and torture websites he called PedoEmpire.

“There’s often a two-speed lane,” Van Eester says. “The informal connection lane goes much faster. That’s why we build these direct police connections across the world. It’s a global crime scene. There are shattered pieces of the puzzle spread around the globe.” In his world, borders don’t exist. Belgium’s offenders are Australia’s offenders. The UK’s online offenders are as dangerous to kids in Liverpool, Sydney, as they are to kids in Liverpool, England. “The National Crime Agency in the UK estimates that, right now, for the UK alone, there are 750,000 male adults with a sexual interest in children,” he says. “That’s huge. Not all of those men will offend. But social media has made it so much easier for them to do so.”

A technological arms race is in full swing between the good and the depraved forces standing either side of the dark web. Van Eester recently worked with the FBI, South African investigators and the AFP on a multi-jurisdictional case where an international network of men had built their own social media platforms and complex analytics technologies to target vulnerable children across the social media world.

“They were all developers,” Van Eester says. “Hardcore paedophiles. They created for themselves social media platforms specifically designed for children, and created a tool that used automatic scraping and big data collection and analysis that runs scripts on normal social media platforms

to detect victims. It's called 'wolf packing'. They would reach out to their own list of validated, vulnerable children and they would hyperlink their platform to the child's social media profiles.

"When you look at the amount of unique victims that were identified, you're gonna fall from your chair." He pauses for impact. "They got 1800 in the US alone."

Detective Inspector Jon Rouse.

Paedophiles don't have to hide behind playground bushes in 2017. "It's all connected to social media now," says Van Eester. "The peer pressure to be online, to be loved and to be thought of as special. We adults use social media as a tool. It's a utility for us. Children don't use it as a utility. They use it as their world. They live it. It's their new playground. It is very easy for an offender to step in, create a fake account, play a role, and reach out to children in that playground. They just have to make a profile like Justin Bieber and wait until a child digitally comes by and says, 'Hey, that's Justin Bieber, wow! And I'm now connected to him!'"

"So then comes the grooming process: 'You're special. You're unique. You're beautiful.' Then they isolate that child from their parents, from their friends. The child's behaviour starts to change. They get more isolated. They get grumpy. They don't listen anymore. There are problems at school. And then there will be the picture exchange. The webcam sexual actions. And then the child will be extorted for more. And, finally, there will be arrangements set up between perpetrator and child. And this is all happening within our living room. We're sitting there with our children and we say, 'Oh, who are you talking to?' And they say, 'Oh, no one, just some friends'. And you pass by and they quickly close the phone and you say, 'Why'd you close it?' And they say, 'Oh, I was done'. And the perpetrator has already created massive, massive destruction to the child."

*"Baby, I'm here, I'm here to stay, I
ain't going nowhere*

I know you're scared 'cause you've been hurt, baby, it's alright ...

I promise to be all that you need."

Right Here, Justin Bieber, 2012

She's an Australian mum who can't say her name or where she lives because she doesn't want the man (unrelated to the Chalmers case) who pretended to be Justin Bieber and asked her eight-year-old daughter online to send him an image of her vagina to know a single detail

Advertisement

about her family. "My daughter had just had a shower and I was drying her hair and she was mucking around on the iPad and somehow this person literally hacked in," she says. "I still don't know how he hacked in because the settings were on private, but his message was so believable that it even had me for a moment."

She is a strict mum when it comes to cyber safety. Rule one: all online use occurs in Mum's presence. Rule two: Mum types in all passwords. Rule three: you're only allowed five online friends, as opposed to the other kids in class who have up to 6000. The messages came through on a popular children's music and chat app. The first message from Justin Bieber's account read: "Who wants to win a 5-minute video call with me?"

"The thing is, the stars do actually get on this app," she says. "I'd already seen previously: 'Win a video call: Katy Perry'. The Justin Bieber account was so well done. It looked very professional. His name was there. His photo. It wasn't a backyard hack job. It was so believable, to the point where the first one got me. And the messages kept going on cycle. A screen shot, four seconds, next shot, four more seconds, and my daughter and I were both, like, 'Oh, wow, Justin Bieber!' He'd just been in Australia so it was really red hot. We couldn't get to the concert, maybe we could win the competition?"

"Then the second message came. It said, 'All you have to do is take a photo of you naked or of your vagina'. And I was, like, 'What?' At first I was literally questioning what I was reading, like I hadn't read it right. It was surreal. Then the next message came and it was that real persuasive grooming kind of message: 'Everyone's doing it, don't worry, I won't tell anyone. It'll be our little secret, just do it now.' I said, 'Give me that iPad', and we drove straight to the police station."

Five weeks on, she remains shocked by the casual ease of it all. She'd spent eight years in park playgrounds and public spaces scanning for danger signs, anything that might cause harm to the most important thing

in her life. She bored her kids with talk of stranger danger, why she couldn't let them walk to school by themselves. Then the stranger got to her daughter in her own home, in the family bathroom, while she was running a towel through her daughter's hair. He connected. And the thing that frightens her most today is that she couldn't have blamed her daughter if she'd sent a message back to Justin Bieber.

"I'd have said, 'This is not your fault'," she says. "A lot of people will probably think, 'Huh, my kid's too smart for that'. But I see my child as - intelligent. I've spoken with her about this stuff, not in great depth, but many, many chats about what to do if anyone asks you to do something inappropriate. But I couldn't blame her because when it's all said and done, they're children. And it's a moment. That's all it is, one single moment. They don't have 24 hours to think about it. It's 'Take the photo now'. And the child's initial reaction might be, 'I'll just quickly do this. No one will know. Justin Bieber is telling me no one will know. I'll do it quickly. Mum's downstairs cooking. She won't know. Maybe it's not right, but I really want to talk to Justin Bieber'.

"That's how I see that this has happened to those 157 kids. The parents might have done everything possible. But the kid just made a split-second decision. They probably said to themselves the next day, 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that'. But, too late, it's done." They're connected.

"I know you know that I made those mistakes maybe once or twice. By once or twice I mean maybe a couple of hundred times."

Sorry, Justin Bieber, 2015

Dr Michael Burke says paedophiles are skilled at concealing their dark secret.

The Filipino grandmother gasps. “Gordon?” she whispers, a palm to her mouth. She’s been his next-door neighbour for 13 years; has placed her wheelie bin out on the pavement beside his every sleepy week in leafy Kenmore. She watched him raise his two boys: kind, respectful young men. She watched him showing true tenderness and love for his wife during pregnancy. His wife is a beautiful human being, she says, the perfect neighbour with a full and open heart. “He was a very good father,” she says. “And he was very helpful to us.” Her husband passed away two years ago and Chalmers took it upon himself to regularly mow her lawn.

“He always listened to me. He was such a good listener. He was so calm. Just nice. Normal. You’d never see a bad thing in him.”

Dr Gregory Vass, a University of NSW education specialist who co-authored a 2016 paper with Gordon Chalmers on indigenous education, says Chalmers was a well-liked fixture of the academic community. “The person I knew was a person who always came across with a very serious disposition, who was politically aware and engaged with the world and thinking critically about the world and power structures and people’s vocations. He was a man who was connected to his spirituality, connected to country, connected to the politics of indigenous Australia and this world. And he always came across as having a real integrity.

“It’s been profoundly disturbing and unsettling. I can’t find words to get my head around what’s going on. I’m still trying to process it and reconcile it on some level. How do you make sense of something like this? It makes you question your own ability to read and make sense of the world.”

In the foyer of Bond University’s Basil Sellers Theatre, Dr Michael Bourke prepares for an afternoon talk on the last day of the Youth, Technology and Virtual Communities conference. He’ll talk about his role as chief psychologist and head of behavioural analysis for the US Marshals Service and his former career spent working in prisons, attempting to make psychological sense of the motivations of child sex offenders.

“The idea that this man seems so normal, that he seemed like the man next door. Well, they are. It’s a misconception that people think they could actually sense that someone had a deviant predilection for children; that their maternal instincts would alert them. In fact, these men are the folks next door, the school teachers, the coaches, the upstanding community members. But there is a dark, secretive compartment they do not share with the world. And in that space all sorts of evil can be expressed.”

So this is the world we live in now, where the dark-web monster greets our kids with the irresistible smiles of Justin Bieber and Harry Styles and Zayn Malik.

Julie Inman Grant, Australia's eSafety Commissioner, is the mother of an 11-year-old girl and five-year-old twin girls. "Here's what I believe," she says. "If you're giving your kid an iPad and they can swipe at the age of four, you need to have age-appropriate conversations and you need to be setting up basic parental controls and you need to be engaged in the kid's online life. We're all guilty of using technology as the digital babysitter, but it can be more hazardous for your kid now to be playing on the 'Musical.ly' app and using the chat function in the next room than it can be leaving your kid on the park bench out by themselves."

Two days previously, at the child exploitation conference, Jon Rouse had approached Inman Grant to ask why messages about online safety were being ignored. She'd asked herself the same question a dozen times. "It is incredible that 157 kids were so vulnerable and were so manipulated to believe that the person on the other end was Justin Bieber; to the point that they were willing to share nudes," she shudders.

Julie Inman Grant

"But predators now know how to look for vulnerabilities in people online. I think kids who are at risk of being exploited online are probably at risk in the real world, too, and may be putting signals out that they're vulnerable in some way and that's what predators prey upon." What matters most is what happens in that single, split-second moment when the monster and the child connect.

Rouse is starting to feel he's been too delicate with the message. He's past being subtle. He leans across the table outside the Basil Sellers Theatre and offers the indelicate truth of why all these global law enforcers have gathered here today. "My unit is really good at what we do," he says. "We

infiltrate and we take these bastards down. We're focused on victim identification and rescuing children that are violently raped. That's what we try to stop. But I've got this other side of things and that's completely beyond my control."

He leans back in his chair. "We've been talking about this for so long," he says. "We've been putting these messages out there, and we missed the boat somewhere in our education processes. We completely missed the boat. I just see an enormous societal failure. I really do."

He sighs again, takes a deep breath and a sip from a takeaway coffee. "The Bieber case," he says, shaking his head. "It leaves me depressed. I mean, what the hell, you know?"

PREVIOUS

Let's get it over with, shall we?

JOHN LETHLEAN

NEXT

A very wrong turn

FELICITY MOORE

